

Zimbabwe:

Empty bullet cases are collected and sent for examination together with guns recovered from poachers

IMAGES: MARK DAVIS



STRENGTHENING the chain of law enforcement

The saying "a chain is as strong as its weakest link" suggests that one can simply strengthen the chain by replacing a link. However, what do you do if it is not just one link but the whole chain that is generally weak? This is the challenge that the Lowveld Rhino Trust has to grapple with, as it is increasingly involved in law enforcement issues arising from rhino poaching in Zimbabwe.

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The Lowveld Rhino Trust (LRT) was established with a focus on specialist rhino management interventions like ear-notching, veterinary treatment, captures and translocations. However, in recent years the LRT has had to engage in various aspects of law enforcement. This is because the prevailing political and economic situation in Zimbabwe has weakened the country's criminal justice system, while poaching pressures have increased.

In an effort to strengthen the law enforcement chain, the LRT, working with other partners, has facilitated cross-border workshops for Zimbabwean Parks and Police officials and their counterparts from South Africa. The two sides have to be encouraged to work together on some long-outstanding poaching cases in Zimbabwe in which the culprits have absconded to, or are trading horns in, South Africa.

In 2009, the LRT contributed funds and technical input to a workshop organised by the Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Management Authority to increase awareness amongst members of the judiciary of the seriousness of rhino crimes. Ongoing sensitisation of this type is planned. LRT is also providing food ration packs to Parks rangers and Police officers deployed in the Lowveld Conservancies to participate in anti-poaching patrols. When operating in conjunction with government law-enforcement officers, the Conservancies' anti-poaching units are able to use greater force against poachers than they would otherwise be entitled to use, including engaging in gunfights. This joint effort has resulted in an increasing number of poachers being arrested or killed.

Despite some successes of this type, we soon realised that the weakest link in the chain was the criminal courts. In 2008-9, 39 suspects were arrested in Zimbabwe for various rhino-related crimes, but only five suspects have been successfully prosecuted and convicted. Out of these five, only two got substantial sentences befitting their crimes, whilst the other three got away with paltry fines. This is due to a combination of factors including: poor investigation of the cases; inadequate preparation and presentation in courts by the prosecution; likely cases of corruption; and a general lack of appreciation by court officials of the rhino poaching crisis.

To reduce this problem, the LRT facilitated visits by a senior law officer from the Attorney General's office to courts that were about to hold rhino poaching trials.

This officer reviewed crime dockets and provided some independent guidance to forestall the possibility of improper conduct by the local court officials.

On one such facilitated visit to a provincial court, it was found that two notorious poachers, who had been arrested with three rhino horns and an AK 47 assault rifle, were being charged with watered-down charges. The possession of the rifle alone should have been sufficient grounds to deny them bail, but the two were in fact granted bail under questionable circumstances. As they were confident that the charges against them would result in only a paltry fine, the poachers continued to appear for remand hearings. When the docket was reviewed and the correct charges were instigated, the defence lawyer asked for adjournment of the case so that he could prepare for the new charges. During the adjournment, the two poachers absconded.

Both these men have returned to rhino poaching, but, after the lessons were learned, further rhino poaching cases in this particular court have been dealt with more appropriately. Indeed a member of the same poaching gang was recently convicted in this court to a 17-year jail term. This success was the culmination of a process that started with effective patrol effort in a conservancy, where the poacher was wounded in a shoot-out and captured, and ended in a competent prosecution effort. At last, all the links in the chain held firm.

Grants

Over the last year we have received very welcome grants for the LRT from Dublin Zoo (7,000 euros), the Foundation Friends of the SafariPark Beekse Bergen van Dierenrijn in Hilvarenbeek (5,000 euros), Stuttgart Zoo (6,000 euros), the Marjorie Coote Animal Charity Trust (£1,000) and the Safari Club International Foundation (\$5,000), as well as all the donors to our Crisis Zimbabwe appeal. Our grateful thanks to all those who have helped the Lowveld Rhino Trust's important work to continue.

